

WHO warns of 236,000 COVID-19 deaths in Europe in next three months

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On Monday, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a stark projection that the reopening of schools and the abandonment of social distancing measures in Europe will lead to catastrophe. Already, 1.3 million people have died in Europe of COVID-19. As the Delta variant spreads, this autumn could be the deadliest season of the pandemic so far.

“Last week, there was an 11 percent increase in the number of deaths in the region; one reliable projection is expecting 236,000 deaths in Europe by December 1,” WHO Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge said. Only 44.2 percent of the European population is fully vaccinated, and Kluge added that the number of people getting vaccinated has fallen by 14 percent over the last six weeks. He said that vaccine skepticism “serves no purpose and is good for no one.”

As hundreds of children fall seriously ill and die of COVID-19 in America, Indonesia and India, Kluge also appealed for vaccinations of children aged over 12, implicitly acknowledging the risk of massive infections in schools of children and youth, who are largely unvaccinated. One indication of the staggering scope of youth infections is the estimate by the Pasteur Institute that just in France alone, there could be 50,000 infections of children each day by late September.

This would mean millions of children falling sick every week in Europe. German Teachers’ Association President Heinz-Peter Meidinger extrapolates figures from the USA on the hospitalisation of children and youth: “If you transfer that to the number of pupils in Germany, i.e., about 11 million, then [hospitalisation] could affect up to 200,000 pupils in the worst case.”

With 5 to 10 percent of children who fall ill with COVID-19 suffering from Long COVID, or other lasting damage, this would mean hundreds of thousands of children suffering debilitating long-term health impacts, in addition to thousands of children dying of the virus.

There is nothing inevitable about such a horrific scenario. If proven scientific policies are adopted to stop the transmission of COVID-19 and eradicate the virus, these hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of infections do not need to occur. However, such policies face determined opposition across the entire European political establishment, who place corporate profits and the wealth of the super-rich above workers’ lives.

Workers fighting to save lives must clearly understand the policies of the ruling elite and the necessity to fight for an independent, scientifically grounded policy to eradicate the virus.

One faction of the ruling elite openly advocates “herd immunity,” by which it means taking no action to halt the spread of the virus, whatever the cost in lives. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the bag man for the world financial aristocracy and the banks in the City of London, is the most open advocate of such a criminal policy.

Johnson has adopted a “cost-benefit” analysis advocating 1,000 COVID-19 deaths a week, or 52,000 per year, in Britain—based on the fascistic conception that it is unacceptable to spend more than £30,000 to save a COVID-19 patient. Last year, before being compelled to adopt an ineffective, partial lockdown amid mass deaths, Johnson bluntly spelled out this perspective, telling his ministers: “No more f*cking lockdowns! Let the bodies pile high in their thousands.”

Another faction proposes “mitigation,” aiming to slow, but not stop, the spread of the virus. Its proponents—the governments in Italy, Spain, Germany and France—also reject lockdowns and demand the reopening of schools and businesses but combined with vaccinations and other measures. The consequences are similarly catastrophic. If children are herded back into unsafe schools, in overcrowded classrooms with poor ventilation, the result will be a rapid spread of this airborne virus, even if children are masked.

Incidence rates have tripled in the German states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin since schools reopened last month, and Chancellor Angela Merkel's government has responded by announcing yesterday that it will no longer base social distancing policies on incidence rates. The French government is ending free COVID-19 testing. Such policies of malign neglect set the stage for the horrific death toll predicted by the WHO.

Underlying the unity of the ruling establishment on murderous pandemic policies are the material interests of the financial aristocracy. Having granted themselves trillions of euros and pounds in bank and corporate bailouts last year, they are demanding that youth keep going to school, so their parents can stay on the job, pumping out profits for the banks. Europe's billionaires thus added a staggering \$1 trillion to their collective net worth during the pandemic.

If hundreds of thousands of lives are to be saved, the working class must intervene independently, against the capitalist system and its political accomplices—including the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties. The Podemos party in the Spanish national government, like the Left Party in regional German governments, directly implemented the diktat of the banks on the pandemic. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France party is joining neo-fascist parties in backing protests against vaccines and vaccine mandates.

To wage this fight, workers must be armed with scientific and political understanding. Ending the pandemic requires the implementation of strict lockdowns together with vaccination, contact tracing and the isolation of infected individuals—until COVID-19 is eradicated, just as smallpox or polio were eradicated in the 20th century. In its recent statement “The eradication of COVID-19 is the only way to stop the pandemic,” the WSWs explained:

The implementation of the eradication strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified mass movement of the working class. Only a mass movement that is not driven by the profit motive and fettered to the obsessive pursuit of personal wealth can generate the social force required to compel a change in policy.

The basic principles guiding the eradication strategy are based on science and the insistence that there can be no limit on the amount spent to

eradicate COVID-19 worldwide. The social interests of masses of people worldwide interact powerfully with scientific truth.

The virus can be eradicated across the globe. In her remarks to the *World Socialist Web Site's* online discussion, “For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives!,” Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz of the University of Calgary presented modeling data showing that aggressive implementation of lockdown and contact tracing policies could bring new cases down to zero in 37 days.

Eradication policies in China have kept the COVID-19 death toll to below 5,000, or a staggering 250 times less than in Europe. To end the pandemic, however, such measures must be implemented worldwide by a conscious, international political movement of the working class.

The European working class has already mounted international struggles for a humane health policy. It was a wave of spontaneous strikes at key plants in Italy and across Europe—in auto, machining and food-processing—that imposed the initial lockdowns in the spring of 2020, saving millions of lives. The union bureaucracy and the political establishment worked together to get workers back on the job, however, and denounced lockdowns as expensive and impractical.

Now the working class and youth across Europe are entering into struggle, with strikes organized or called by train drivers, health care and delivery workers in Germany, lorry drivers in Britain and school canteen workers in France.

Many lives depend on workers taking these strike struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and turning them into a fight against the inhumane pandemic policy of the super-rich. This entails the building of rank-and-file workplace safety committees to enforce the closure of schools and nonessential industries, as part of an international, socialist struggle against the pandemic and the capitalist system.



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